Sailor's Friend, NAVY'S ENEMY

TALE OF OLD VICTORIA

BY J. K. NESSBITT

BILL LYONS was one of those itinerant waterfront characters who came to Victoria in early days and helped, in a shady sort of way, to give this place its atmosphere.

We often think—or perhaps we like to think—that Victoria in its formative years was peopled with the gentry from England. Well, there was English gentry here, but there was also the other kind, and they were just as important in bringing a picturesqueness to Victoria. If there had been only gentry here Victoria would have indeed been stuffy.

Bill Lyons seems to have operated a number of waterfront hotels here—the New Zealand House, the Drury Lane Inn, among others. In those hostels sailormen stayed, and they and Bill Lyons sat around the bar most of the night spinning tall tales, and romancing about their adventures. And, in the bar, many a plot was schemed out, plots that in due course had all Victoria talking.

One of the scandals of the day was the number of British sailors who were deserting from Queen Victoria's warships in Esquimalt harbor. The United States was the magnet, and from Victoria they would set out in small boats and sometimes rafts, and paddle across the strait to Port Angeles, and so away. Every time there was a desertion some civilian in Victoria was suspected of helping, but it was not often anyone was caught.

UP TO HIS NECK

As it turned out, our friend Bill Lyons was up to his neck in this desertion business!

In Febrsary of 1866 a bark, the Mustang, ran ashore in Clayoquot Sound, on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Bill Lyons and a bunch of the boys sitting one night in the bar, decided the Mustang was the very ship for them. Bill Lyons had the money and so he bought the vessel, as noted in The Colonist:

"Sale of wrecked bark Mustang—The interests in the hull and cargo of this vessel were sold on Saturday at public auction. The hull was bought by Mr. William Lyons, as well as the cargo, except a few trifling interests.

"We understand that Capt. Wright of the steamer Diana, and several others are interested in the speculation which, unless the wind and waves and the Indians have committed many trespasses on the property, will doubtless turn out to be a profitable investment."

There was lying idle in Victoria harbor at the time a well-known small schooner, the Meg Merillies, and Lyons and his pals promptly chartered her, so that they could proceed to the Mustang on the West Coast.

"The wreck of the Mustang — Mr. William Lyons, who purchased the wrecked bark Mustang and her cargo, has fitted out the schooner Meg Merillies, Capt. Pamphlett, with supplies and will take a gang of men this morning to the scene of the wreck to endeavor to save the property. The party will be well armed, in case of molestation by the Indians in that neighborhood."

WRECK LOOTED

IT WAS A MONTH before Victoria heard anything from Bill Lyons and Capt. Pamphlett.

Then came one of the great sea adventure stories of our history, as told at the time in The Colonist:

"From the wreck of the Mustang—From Mr. W. Lyons, who returned on Saturday in the Meg Merillies from the scene of the wreck of the American bark Mustang in Clayoquot Sound we learn the following:

"The schooner reached Clayoquot Sound after a fine run of 15 hours. The bark appeared to be riding anchor in perfect order. The foreman and crew, on going on board, discovered that the vessel had been robbed of everything within reach by the Indians (white men, doubtless, would have done the same) including cargo, compasses, pump rods, wheel ropes, capstan head, etc. —every possible damage was done by the natives, who probably intended eventually to set fire to the vessel. Some sails and iron work were found on shore. All the cargo, stoves, etc., had been removed.

"Capt. Pamphlett, who speaks the Indian language, went up the Sound and after some delay Cedah-Kanim, the well-known chief of the tribe, came on board and treated the party with great friendship. He gave up all his share of the plunder and he and his two sons tried to induce their tillicums to do the same. A meeting was held and the majority of the tyhees were in favor of giving up all the property in their possession, but others obstinately refused and the consequence was that the willing ones also declined.

"Some of the natives were very saucy, and when told that they would bring upon themselves the destruction of their ranches, canoes and such, one man jeeringly replied that one Siwash could kill three man-of-war's men. Seeing that further remonstrance was useless, the schooner returned to the wreck and removed the rest of the ship's gear.

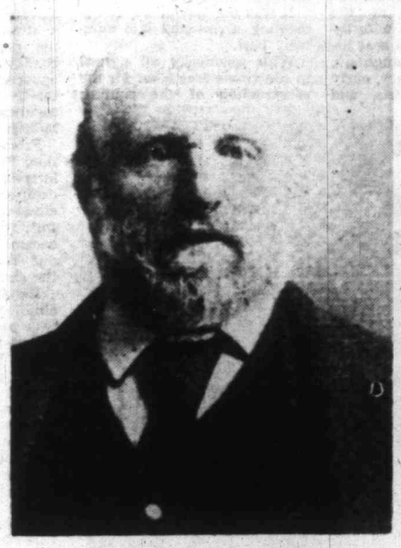
"Capt. Pamphlett went a second time up the Sound to give the natives another chance, but some still objected and nothing was done. Cedah-Kanim did all he could and told Lyons that no restitution would be made unless a gunboat came, and to tell Capt. Kennedy that his 'tum-tum' was 'hyas klosh,' and he wanted to see a gunboat come up to compel the tribe to yield to his authority. His tribe appeared very numerous and powerful. There were many of them wearing new boots they had taken from the wreck.

NAVY SUSPICIOUS

"Lyons succeeded in saving half the running gear, the Indians having been afraid to go up aloft, and all the anchors and chains, rigging and backstays. The wreck was burnt and about 14 cwt. of copper saved. The property saved will be sold at auction by Mr. McCrea on Wednesday next. Lyons believes that by the presence of a gunboat he could still recover most of the stolen property."

HOWEVER, the navy, having its suspicions, looked with a jaundiced eye on Bill Lyons, and so no gunboat was sent, and Bill Lyons wrote the whole unfortunate adventure down to experience in life.

Lyons was constantly in the news in 1866. In June we find him in Washington Territory, and into some trouble, though he was able to talk his way out of it.



CAPT. THOMAS PAMPHLETT
. . . unsuspecting, he may have worked for a scoundrel.

Victorians read of it in their morning newspaper: "On Saturday evening, the Sir James Douglas left this port for Bellingham Bay, W.T., with several English coal miners aboard, who had been engaged to work in the mines there. Among the passengers was W. Lyons of the New Zealand House. The usual precautions were taken by Capt. Clarke to prevent liquors being smuggled, but a search failed to disclose any contraband packages.

"Arrived at Bellingham Bay the American customs officer, W. S. Barnard, after the landing of the furniture and effects of the miners, left the steamer and later in the evening returned and informed that some smuggled liquors were on board. A search was made by the mate, who discovered three or four packages of liquors in the forehold. The steamer left early the next morning for Port Angeles, where Lyons was taken into custody as a smuggler."

There was a long court case, but Lyons was freed: "The honorable commissioner, in delivering his verdict, said that he had given the evidence his best attention and could but come to the conclusion that the evidence given on behalf of the prosecution was not sufficient to convict the prisoner, who must therefore be discharged, but he must say that there was great suspicion against the prisoner."

DESERTERS LOST

Bill Lyons came back to Victoria and presided as "mine host" at the waterfront New Zealand House and Drury Lane Inn, and he kept quiet for two years, the perfectly respectable citizen.

But the desertions from the navy continued!

There was shock and concern in Victoria when an entire party of deserters lost their lives trying to cross to the American side: "The missing sailors—The steam launch, on returning from Sooke, brought no additional news of importance as to the deserters from HMS Scout. A cap of a third man was found and that was all.

"The presumption is the whole seven perished, and the bodies found were the only two that floated ashore. This sad occurrence ought to act as a warning to sailors deserting from our naval vessels, and stop it, at least for the present."

TWO DAYS later the law clamped its arms around Bill Lyons: "Enticing sailors to desert—The charge in the police court against William Lyons of the Drury Lane Inn for aiding HM seamen to escape . . . Mr. J. F. McCreight (later B.C.'s first premier) instructed by Mr. Bishop, appeared for Lyons.

"J. Lachapelle was the principal witness for the court. He valued the boat sold by Lyons to the sailors in question for $70, at $45. He knew the boat, he repaired her to the amount of $25. The man who managed the negotiations was dressed in civilian's clothes, to deceive Lyons, he supposed, and others he might meet while making arrangements to escape.

NO DOUBT ALL DIED

"George Cole, a seaman belonging to the Scout, knew the seven men, saw them leave Victoria at midnight on last Sunday week; had seen the boat in which two dead bodies were found at Sooke.

"Capt. Price of the Scout and a sergeant-of-marines were examined . . . The sergeant said that he had no doubt all seven were drowned—The accused was ably defended by his counsel . . ."

The case went on for some days, and then: "The charge of enticing naval seamen to desert—William Lyons was brought before the police magistrate—for sentencing on the charge of procuring and assisting HM seamen to desert. The Bench addressed him to the effect that the means of getting the men away was traced to him, the accused, and taking the best view of the case he, the magistrate, came to the conclusion that Lyons had not proved his innocence. He would therefore impose a fine of £30, or six months' imprisonment with hard labor."

Bill Lyons paid his fine, and then, apparently, faded away from Victoria, and where he went or what he did and when he died we know not now, nearly a century later.